

THE INCINERATOR

Wendy was the dog groomer and hospital manager. He was king of the roost since the Doc only hung around for surgery and clinic hours. Despite one polio shrunk arm, Wendy'd lift the biggest clients up onto the grooming table then over to the bath tub, except on those rare occasions when he could coax the dog to jump up for its clip and bath. You slung shit in the runs

out back and not invariably made it through the day unbiten. As with Pavlov's theory, you eventually became gun shy around dogs -- jumpy as a cat in a dog house, which is exactly where you worked -- and although no one ever suspected your false bravado in the wild grabs you made for the meanest mutts (the Doc always called on you when a particularly ferocious 4-legged fiend was brought in), you quaked inside and the damned dogs knew it and looked you in the eye. So eyes

averted, you spoke in a firm and overly loud voice: "Nice fella, o.k. boy, let's get those porcupine quills out." And all the time trying to subdue your urge to shriek like a madman and run away. You learned

fast by observing Wendy's method of dog training: this unassuming dog named Ashley surprised Wendy one day and came away with a chunk of hand. Wendy managed to get Ashley back into his cage. He then returned to the grooming room where he stopped up the bleeding. Next he selected a hefty-sized grooming brush and returned to Ashley's cage where, despite having only one good arm, he convinced Ashley that a clip and bath were preferable to being dog food for the other clients, who, meanwhile, were howling pitifully, like a bad scene from Disney's Lady & the Tramp. You,

however, were mostly restricted to handling the terminal patients and the dump-offs (who held one-way tickets), and although you considered beating the worst offenders, it seemed akin, somehow, to beating a dead horse. Before

bumping them off with an o.d. of pentobarbital, you'd fabricate tearful tales of a better afterlife for the loved one and received a generous tip for a sympathetic ear. Once, out back, after a busy holiday, a brush

fire sparked when ashes blew out of the overstuffed incinerator. It took 50 volunteer firefighters 1/2 day to control it. After that, Wendy instituted several Death Row runs to accommodate the holiday orphans.